

# Public Policy Update

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## Gaining a New Perspective: An APS OSTP Fellow's Experience

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The first 100 days of President **Obama's** administration came to fruition about the time that the six-month period of the APS Fellowship, in which I was serving in the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) in the Executive Office of the President (EOP), was coming to a close. I would like to thank APS for the support provided to facilitate me serving in the Fellowship, the administration of the University of Georgia (UGA), the faculty and staff in the Department of Plant Pathology at UGA for their flexibility during this period, and the hospitality of OSTP personnel (both the previous and current administrations). For my positive experience at OSTP, great appreciation is expressed to **Ted Wackler** (deputy associate director for science), **Michele Colby** (National and Homeland Security Division), **Chavonda Jacobs-Young** (senior policy analyst), and **John Marburger III** and **John Holdren** (former and current directors of OSTP, respectively).

The OSTP “advises the president on the effects of science and technology on domestic and international affairs,” “serves as a source of scientific and technological analysis and judgment for the president with respect to major policies, plans, and programs of the federal government,” and “leads an interagency effort to develop and implement sound science and technology policies and budgets.” Additionally, the “office works with the private sector to ensure federal investments in science and technology contribute to economic prosperity, environmental quality, and national security.” Amazingly, these responsibilities are carried out with a budget of about \$5 million per year, a paltry sum in Washington, D.C. Detailees from federal agencies and fellows supported by various organizations inside and outside of the federal government make up about half of the science and technology staff, and are vital to the accomplishments of the office (Congressional Research Service RL-34736; February 6, 2009). President **John F. Kennedy** is attributed to the quote, “Washington is a city of Southern efficiency and Northern charm.” I found OSTP to be an exception to this standard of measure, or perhaps currently being from Georgia, I may be biased about the efficiency of the South. An incredible expanse of science and technology is addressed by OSTP with a strong and collaborative staff. Since the confirmation of Holdren's appointment in mid-March, he has been actively addressing many major issues that range from reporting on the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds to energy and climate change (see interview in *Science* 324:324–325).

As indicated above, a major role of OSTP is to lead interagency efforts. This is accomplished through the National Science and Technology Council (NSTC), which is organized around four primary committees: the Committee of Environment and Natural Resources, the Committee on Homeland and National Security, the Committee on Science, and the Committee on Technology. These committees serve as an umbrella organization for several subcommittees, working groups, and task forces that provide reports on the direction of endeavors the federal government does and should support ([www.ostp.gov/cs/nstc/documents\\_reports](http://www.ostp.gov/cs/nstc/documents_reports)). So yes, agencies within the federal government do talk to each other, and studying reports relevant to your area of interest will provide some insight into the science and technology priorities in federal agencies.

The EOP works with the private sector through the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology (PCAST). The membership of this group was announced when the president addressed the National Academy of Science (NAS) on April 27, 2009 ([www8.nationalacademies.org/onpinews/newsitem.aspx?RecordID=20090427](http://www8.nationalacademies.org/onpinews/newsitem.aspx?RecordID=20090427)). As only the fourth president to address the NAS, he indicated that science is “more essential for our prosperity, our security, our health, and our environment than it has ever been.”

Unfortunately my time at OSTP came to a close as changes at USDA that will likely impact APS members were just getting underway. **Rajiv Shah** has been nominated to be the USDA under secretary of research, education, and economics and chief scientist, with his confirmation hearing on May 7. Shah is a physician and economist, and is currently director of agricultural development in the Global Development Program at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The appointment of Shah is a significant change, as the under secretary and chief scientist positions have generally been held by those with senior administrative experience at a college or university. If confirmed, it will be under Shah's direction that the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) will be

established in place of USDA-CSREES. At his confirmation hearings, Shah indicated that, “Last year this committee laid the groundwork for taking this leadership into the future by creating the National Institute of Food and Agriculture. Establishing a new National Institute is a unique opportunity to create a strategic, focused, and result-oriented research enterprise that can help bring improved agricultural research to bear in serving our nation’s food, health, and energy needs.” A potential director for the NIFA has not been named at the time this piece was submitted for *Phytopathology News*.

Unfortunately, no funding increase was provided for research supported by USDA-CSREES in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Congress did authorize \$2.5 billion to USDA and \$4.7 billion to the Department of Commerce to enhance broadband access, particularly in rural America, which might hopefully reduce the carbon footprint of delivering extension programs in the future. If you are a regular reader of *Phytopathology News*, you are familiar with the activities of the APS Public Policy Board to increase awareness of federal agencies about plant pathology and the endeavors of members. Hence, my time at OSTP has been another activity in this vein. An underlying theme of the election in November was change, and the transformation of USDA-CSREES to the NIFA that is legislated to be in place by October 1, 2009, will likely be a significant change. Keeping federal agencies apprised of what plant pathologists do and why it is relevant to the science agenda of the nation is required if support for plant pathology is to grow. ■